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Women in the Looking-Glass: Post-colonial and Psychoanalytical Techniques in Jean
Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea

When Jean Rhys takes on the underdog tale of Charlotte Brontë's Bertha Mason, she both moves beyond license by appropriating a popular, Victorian text and imposes limits by choosing a story with an unchangeable ending. Rhys engages Jane Eyre with contemporary theories and experiences that make this prequel an exercise in literary difference arriving at an identical point with literary history. Rhys applies the labels, terms, and situations from a literary environment consciously engaging in concepts such as postcolonial and psychoanalytical theory to a storyline from the 1840s.

One of the most interesting balances that Rhys employs is a conscious awareness of Jane Eyre's existence while Wide Sargasso Sea develops. She takes on a complex conception of time that means that her characters' present time is complicated by a past life that will take place in their future. In other words, the story Rhys composes is new, but the end result including overlapping time with Jane Eyre existed before the characters were born into Wide Sargasso Sea. In this way, Antoinette can wonder about England: "I must know more than I know already. For I know that house where I will be cold and not belonging, the bed I shall lie in has red curtains and I have slept there many times before, long ago" (67). Even as the story of Antoinette/Bertha Cosway Mason unfolds in the 1960s, she has existed at Thornfield since 1847. Rhys uses this delicate point to highlight Antoinette's predestined

status as the madwoman of a Victorian novel. Consequently, when Antoinette finds herself locked in Thornfield's attic, she opens her narration of Part Three questioning "why...have [I] been brought here. For what reason? There must be a reason. What is it that I must do?" (106). From her naissance as a character in Rhys's novel, Antoinette's fate is to destroy Thornfield and die, breaking the barriers to Jane's marriage with Rochester. Rhys balks against the "off stage" (Rhys 136) small role the West Indian character plays, sure there are reasons she ends up mad in an attic in England.

Antoinette's predestined fate begs the question why Jean Rhys would take up her story at all. One could argue that Rhys takes on a novel with a pre-written ending in order to tackle the ideas that lead up to this ending. She writes to Diana Athill that "[she does] like a basis of fact" (144). Her contemporary consciousness recognizes interesting theories unconsciously at work in Jane Eyre. In writing the marginalized Bertha Mason's history, Rhys is free to engage in complex postcolonial and psychoanalytical theories as they appear in the earlier Victorian text. Considering her own Caribbean background (Raiskin 3), Rhys empathizes with the alienated Creole woman who is merely mad in Jane Eyre. In a letter to Selma Dias she says to "Take a look at Jane Eyre. That unfortunate death of a Creole! I'm fighting mad to write *her* story" (137). From her modern perspective, the subsumed "other" must be given a voice against Victorian oppression.

Critics confirm that Rhys's personal history makes the ideal foundation to empathize with her subjugated heroine. Fiona Barnes describes Rhys's novel as "infused with her postcolonial perspective...dramatiz[ing] the lessons learned from her experiences as an exiled white Creole West Indian woman in England" (151). Rhys has the authority to take on the minor role of Bertha Mason and comment on Victorian exclusion while finally giving

voice to the underdeveloped character. Ellen G. Friedman describes Rhys's manipulation as "ruptur[ing]" the nineteenth-century text "making holes and blank spaces through which a reader is compelled to look with a self-consciously twentieth-century vision that will necessarily transform what it sees" (119). In a sense, Friedman claims that Rhys telling Bertha's story has made it impossible to read Jane Eyre free from the influence of Wide Sargasso Sea because of the contemporary issues Rhys brings to the forefront in her tale.

Rhys's ensnares postcolonial ideas of slavery and "not belonging" to reinforce the inescapable nature of Antoinette's duty. The slave history of Antoinette's homeland provides an appealing double to her own enslaved character. Bound to an inevitable fate, Antoinette is a slave to the Jane Eyre narrative. Rhys shows a post-slavery society in Wide Sargasso Sea that emphasizes how the vile nature of bondage has impacted the entire Jamaican community. The narrative demonstrates violent response to oppression which culminates in a riot burning down the Creole homestead, Coulibri. The burning scene language is nearly identical to Antoinette's dream about burning down Thornfield (27). Rhys makes a direct connection between the response of the exploited ex-slave community and Antoinette's outburst against her subjugation at Thornfield. While the Jamaican ex-slaves appear free in this text, the economic reality of white hegemony keeps them dominated. Even though Rhys performs the independent act of writing out Bertha Mason's life, she is bound by the literary facts of Jane Eyre. Yet the ex-slaves' riot is an effort to rid themselves of their oppressors while Antoinette's actions are subservient to her role in the novel, necessary because Brontë's Jane Eyre requires them. The revolutionary act, then, is Rhys giving the character voice outside of Jane Eyre and shifting the perception of her actions within the novel.

If the ex-slave community and Antoinette share likenesses, many critics agree that Antoinette can act as a double for Jane herself. The remarkable way in which Rhys crafts this relationship is through contemporary psychoanalytic concepts involving mirrors. Current theory suggests that the reflected self in the mirror is something we recognize as separate from a self we conceive from within. Psychoanalytical theorist, Jacques Lacan, claims that a baby's unified sense of self is shattered with the realization that the image in a mirror is a reflection of the baby (1286). It's not possible to bridge the gap between the glass surface and that other person within the mirror who both is and is not the person reflected. The concept takes on interesting applications in the case of Antoinette and Jane when considering their interactions with mirrors. Jane encounters her image in a mirror within the first few pages of Jane Eyre. Brontë describes Jane looking into "the depth it revealed" only to see a "strange little figure there gazing at me, with a white face and arms specking the gloom, and glittering eyes of fear moving where all else was still" (10). The reflection seems to be someone she doesn't know, described as something other than reality. The figure trapped in the mirror is and is not the little girl locked in the room. Critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar describe this moment in Jane Eyre as though the mirror "is also a sort of chamber, a mysterious enclosure in which images of the self are trapped" (341). The incongruity between Jane's willful interior self and the "little figure" in the mirror anticipates the marginalized societal role Jane plays through most of the novel. Yet Jane holds a secure position in English society in comparison to the white Creole, Bertha.

In contrast with Jane's mirror gaze while "jailed" in the "red room"(10), Antoinette's first narrated mirroring experience is a gaze with another human rather than a mirror. After rioting ex-slaves burn down Coulibri, she thinks she might run to her colored friend, Tia, to

keep a remnant of her past life. As she rushes to the other child, Tia throws a rock making Antoinette's face bleed: "I looked at [Tia] and I saw her face crumple up as she began to cry. We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking glass" (27). Rhys sets up the relationship between Antoinette and Tia showing that the Creole is as much a marginalized person in English society as it is in relation to the ex-slave community in Jamaica. Antoinette's actions draw attention to the psychoanalytical concept that the interior self can never unify with its mirrored image just as a white Creole cannot become part of Tia's society in Jamaica. Choosing Tia as Antoinette's mirror double, Rhys suggests that Antoinette's sympathies are tied into the Jamaican culture and in opposition with English culture.

Antoinette's and Jane's direct intersection as doubles occurs with a mirror in Jane Eyre. Jane describes a dream to Rochester that takes on an air of reality in the narration. She explain how a figure took her wedding veil and tried it on in a mirror. This mirror reflects Bertha/Antoinette and Jane sees the reflection, rather than the original face, suggesting that the individual in the mirror is interchangeable with Jane's own reflection. Ironically, the madwoman in the wedding veil is the rightful owner of matrimonial garments intended for Rochester. The reflection Jane studies is a twice-removed version of the bride Jane is to become. As a dream, the reflection is also twice removed from reality; once in the dream and once in the glass. However, the narration breaks down as a dream when Jane says "I lost consciousness: for the second time in my life—only the second time—I became insensible from terror" (Brontë 341.) Jane's justification of her response sounds defensive as if her faint actually happened rather than being a dreamed action. Rochester's explosive "'Thank God!...if anything malignant did come near you last night, it was only the veil that was

harmful. Oh, to think what might have happened" (342). Neither Rochester nor Jane treat the dream as an imaginary event and the reality of the night's proceedings remain in question when Sophie pins Jane's wedding veil on which is "(the plain square of blond after all)"(344). Readers must question whether or not there was more than one veil and if the blond veil is a change because another veil has been destroyed. The tenuous reality of the mirror incident lends to the interchangeability of the images reflected in the mirror with those viewing the reflection.

As if her past incidents with mirrors has made Jane anxious about what she'll find in them, Sophie has to stop her on her wedding day, ironically in Lacan's native French, to insist she looks in the mirror in which "[she] ha[s] not taken one peep" (344). Jane notes "I saw a...figure, so unlike my usual self that it seemed almost the image of a stranger" (344). Suggesting Jane's childhood mirror experience, the "robed and veiled" (344) image is as much a stranger to Jane as the "glittering[-]eyed" (10) child in the red room and the madwoman she recently observed in the looking-glass.

Mirroring is prevalent throughout the text of Wide Sargasso Sea. Rather than provide the opposite or mirror image of Bronte's wedding-veil mirror experience through Antoinette's perspective, Rhys makes a completely separate mirror incident. Again couched within a dream reminiscent of Jane's story to Rochester, Antoinette, now Bertha, dreams she is wandering Thornfield. Rhys suggests that Bertha may encounter another person when she "imagine[s] that [she] heard a footstep" (Rhys 111). While readers have the advantage of knowing Bertha is the ghost of the house, when she see the ghost, we can momentarily wonder if she has come across Jane Eyre in the hall. But Rhys encapsulates the woman with "a gilt frame" (112) indicating that Bertha has come up against her own image in the mirror.

The hint that there could be someone else again opens the possibility that the reflection is interchangeable with Jane Eyre. Bertha indicates that she “knew” the woman in the frame, but does not articulate if she recognizes that person as someone merely familiar to her, as Jane would be after trying on her veil, or if she literally knows it is her own self.

Antoinette’s sense of self dissipates over the course of Wide Sargasso Sea from her lively Creole existence to the mad woman in Brontë’s novel.

Antoinette’s relationship with the looking glass up to this point is literally a relationship with herself. In the third part of Wide Sargasso Sea, she notes the absence of a looking-glass in conjunction with her lost sense of self when at Thornfield. There is no looking-glass for her use in her new apartments (107). Rochester’s insistence on calling her Bertha already damaged her sense of self. She argues that she saw “Antoinette drifting out of the window with her scents, her pretty clothes and her looking-glass” (107) when her husband assigns her a new name. The Antoinette identity disappears with the name transition, but she also cannot form a new sense of self because she has no way to view herself at Thornfield.

Rhys emphasizes that the character Bertha readers have known from the Victorian perspective is not the person her character, Antoinette, perceives as herself. At one point, the child Antoinette believed that inanimate objects, specifically including looking glasses, were alive (22). She describes how, as a lonely child, she had a relationship with her image: “The girl I saw was myself, yet not quite myself...I tried to kiss her. But the glass was between us—hard, cold and misted over with my breath” (107). Rhys establishes the gaping space between the self seen in the exterior of a looking glass and the person who gazes upon the glass. If that image is interchangeable with Jane Eyre, as well as her character Bertha, then

Rhys claims that Antoinette was always distanced from the image Victorian readers knew as the madwoman in the attic. In a nod to the primacy of Brontë's text, Rhys allows that while Antoinette could be an alternate identity for Jane, her own image and sense of self is completely subsumed in her madwoman role in Jane Eyre until her leap from the battlements.

The postcolonial and psychoanalytical ideas come together at the end of Wide Sargasso Sea. Rhys again highlights Antoinette's ties with the ex-slave community in Jamaica. The white Creole sees a mirror image of herself in Tia, stressing her personal connection with the oppressed colored community. In her dream of burning down Thornfield, she sees her life in the fire-lit sky including "all colours" (112) which, when mixed together, come out black. Her mirrored self, Tia, beckons her to jump from the battlements with "You frightened?" (112), challenging Antoinette to become a unified whole by joining her and rejecting the English society. Yet Lacan's mirror concept and Rhys's commitment to post colonial concepts prove that Tia's invitation is false and Antoinette can never be whole by attempting to join with her mirrored image. Rhys's catalogue of comforting Jamaican memories intertwined with Tia's summons give the final touches to Antoinette's "otherness" at Thornfield. Her effort to bridge the gap between her mirror double in a suicidal jump is a triumphant act (Rhys 137) showing the subjugated character harming her oppressors and choosing freedom in death over restriction in the dominant world. Even if she cannot become one with Tia, she can be free of Rochester and English society. Rhys's stance opens up a new reading of Bertha's death in Jane Eyre, despite the ties to a pre-destined fate by writing to join an existing storyline. Antoinette's death plunge effectively shatters the mirror she shares with Jane Eyre, freeing Jane's mirror image from the madwoman and opening the path to marriage with Rochester.

Jean Rhys breathes life into the marginalized West Indian madwoman from Jane Eyre, Bertha Mason. Enslaved to Brontë's narrative, the character is subsumed in the role as demonstrated by Rhys's allusions to Antoinette's relation with the oppressed ex-slave community in Jamaica. She acts as a mirror double of Jane Eyre creating a caricature of the Rochester bride. These concepts come together in her revolutionary jump from the Thornfield battlements that frees her from the self-trapping/doubling mirror and the oppressive English society.

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